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SUBJECT: UNDER SECRETARY BURNS' MEETING WITH TAJIKISTAN
PRESIDENT RAHMON

Classified By: Under Secretary William Burns
for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) In a forty minute meeting on September 25, Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon and Under Secretary William Burns discussed the U.S.-Tajik relationship and Rahmon's views on issues facing South and Central Asia. Rahmon expressed concern over the situation in Afghanistan stressing that, in the end, Afghan stability depends on Pakistan. On the Russia/Georgia conflict, Rahmon noted Russian pressure, but assured Under Secretary Burns Tajikistan would stand firm on territorial integrity. Stability was a theme that underlay his discussion not only about Afghanistan, but also narcotics trafficking, civil society organizations and reform in general. He claimed Tajikistan is building its democratic, secular society based on its own customs and traditions -- and at its own pace.

¶2. (SBU) Meeting Participants:

Emomali Rahmon, President of Tajikistan
Presidential Adviser Erkin Rahmatulloev
Ambassador to the United States Abdujabbor Shirinov
Tajik Permanent Representative to the United Nations
Sirojiddin Aslov

Under Secretary William Burns
SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary George Krol
SCA/CEN Brian Roraff (notetaker)

¶3. (C) President Rahmon began the meeting by thanking the United States for our security assistance to Tajikistan, as well as our efforts to bring stability to Afghanistan. He characterized the U.S.-Tajik relationship as strong. He then asked about the status of Tajikistan's USD 20 million request for wheat seed, noting that the United States has not decided the final form the assistance will take.

¶4. (C) Rahmon then delved into issues facing Tajikistan, starting with Afghanistan, which he described as a complicated situation. He said that stability in Afghanistan was important to Tajikistan because it lies between Tajikistan and Pakistan, and therefore the sea and world markets. Tajikistan is supporting Afghan stability: it has agreed to sell electricity to Afghanistan, five bridges link the two countries, and Tajikistan is helping connect the region, building a road network that connects the region from

Kazakhstan through Afghanistan to Pakistan. However, the problem of narcotics and narcotics trafficking is a serious problem facing the region.

¶15. (C) Rahmon addressed the coming winter, which he said would be worse than last year's. Water shortages have caused a drop of 30 per cent in Tajikistan's hydroelectric capacity this year, which has resulted in only sixteen hours of electricity a day to the capital Dushanbe. He noted that 60 percent of water flowing through Central Asia originates in Tajikistan, but Tajikistan only uses 5-7 percent. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, uses over 50 percent of the water in the region.

¶16. (C) He ended his introduction by telling Under Secretary Burns that Tajikistan is ready to cooperate on the wide range of issues that make up the U.S.-Tajik relationship, concluding with a pitch for more U.S. trade and investment.

¶17. (C) Under Secretary Burns told Rahmon the United States has a strong interest in stability in Afghanistan, and therefore we value our security relationship with Tajikistan, including on counternarcotics. He followed up on the theme of U.S. investment in Tajikistan, telling Rahmon that we want to be helpful, but that Tajikistan could help itself attract investment by cooperating with the International Monetary Fund and repaying its loans. Rahmon responded by pledging to continue cooperation with the Fund.

¶18. (C) Under Secretary Burns then asked Rahmon how he saw the situation in Afghanistan developing. Rahmon replied simply that stability in Afghanistan depended on stabilizing Pakistan. The homeland of the Taliban, he said, is Pakistan not Afghanistan, and the Taliban must be eliminated there. He said that the United States should strengthen its presence in Afghanistan while at the same time helping stabilize Pakistan. The United States should not separate stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

¶19. (C) Under Secretary Burns asked Rahmon for his impression of Pakistani President Asif Zardari. Rahmon responded that Zardari was a good businessman, but that in politics he simply traded on the reputation of his late wife, Benazir Bhutto. Unlike Bhutto, Zardari will not be able to keep Nawaz Sharif in check, which is worrisome because Sharif has extremist roclivities. Nevertheless, countries must deal with Zardari, and at least he is not a military general, dependent on the military and security services like Musharraf.

¶110. (C) Moving to Georgia, Under Secretary Burns noted that Tajikistan did not recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia and asked Rahmon for his view on the situation. Rahmon started by characterizing the recent summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as "tough" due to Russian pressure. He said that President Saakashvili did not think before invading South Ossetia, and could not understand why Saakashvili would have fallen for Russian provocations. Saakashvili was simply impatient and unprepared. Rahmon said that poor relations between the United States and Russia put Tajikistan in a difficult position and that no one will benefit from a conflict between Moscow and Washington. He called for "cooler heads," calmer rhetoric and objective analysis of the situation in order to avoid a "world catastrophe."

¶111. (C) Under Secretary Burns turned to civil society and urged Rahmon to recognize the role nongovernmental organizations and the role they can play in improving Tajik society. U.S. and EU nongovernmental organizations can help Tajikistan, especially a nongovernmental organization like Mercy Corps, which helped Tajikistan through the rough winter last year.

¶112. (C) Rahmon responded by noting Tajik progress in civil society since 2002: where there used to be 800 civil society organizations, there are now 3,000; the number of

television channels has increased from one to ten; there are now 1,000 newspapers in Tajikistan. Rahmon pointed to security as a main concern of his government, arguing that the government must deal not only with Western nongovernmental organizations, but also Islamic ones. While he appreciated the work of nongovernmental organizations connected to the European Union and the United States, nonetheless, he was concerned about "Muslim funds" that operate in Tajikistan, commenting that they could present security concerns to Tajikistan. Again, he noted the tragic civil war Tajikistan endured as an experience that influences Tajikistan's attitude toward nongovernmental organizations.

¶13. (C) In conclusion, Rahmon assured Under Secretary Burns that Tajikistan is building its society to be neither Islamic nor Communist, but rather a democratic, law abiding secular society based on Tajik customs and traditions. He noted he had sent his experts to the United States and to Europe to learn from other societies. He proclaimed "I myself am a democrat," but said Tajikistan cannot move hastily on reform.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, he said, the Tajik people were not prepared and the country fell into five years of civil war causing over one million refugees. Tajikistan, he stressed, will move "step by step" to change the living standards and mentality of the people. Above all, Rahmon stressed Tajikistan needs time: "Do not force change on us -- we need time."

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